supporting paper
for the MFA thesis exhibition:

the privilege of being SOLID

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Abstract:

My thesis exhibition entitled *The Privilege of Being Solid* is an exploration of the tension that is generated by our desire for an ultimate corporeal security and the realization that nothing is permanent. This tension expresses itself in the world in varying degrees through programs of repression oscillating with periods of chaos. We live in a post-modern era of fragmentation and uncertainty, although modernist attitudes concerned with universals, certainties and a manic desire to control largely guide many of our institutions, political and otherwise. I believe that this desire to control creates cultural anxiety due to the virtual unattainability of certainty and control. This denial of our inherent insecurity, vulnerability and ultimate mortality generates a violence that feeds back into our collective anxiety. The loop perpetuates itself in a cycle of fear, denial and arrogance that fuels a raft of industries devoted to security, feeding off of our communal angst. The very human characteristic that has enabled these circumstances is the subject of this exhibition.

It is my intention to reflect some of the contradictions found in our current condition by generating a dialogue between the solid and fragile; beauty and the abject; certainty and doubt; liquid and solid; as well as humor and emotional gravity. These contradictions extend to my material of choice as well. Although wax appears to be solid, it is in fact classified as a liquid. It is always in flux and unless conditions are ideal, wax remains in a precariously unstable condition. It also reflects in its materiality, a sensuality that is of primary importance to me as an artist, both in terms of the processes in which I engage in my studio, as well as the objects I create for a potential viewer.

Through sculptural processes of casting, pouring and melting, encaustic mark making and digital manipulations of physical theater, I want to contrast the forces at work within our lives that seek to control our environment with notions of surrender to the natural state of impermanence in which we reside. I want to reflect the oscillation between the collective desire for security and the knowledge of our inherent fragility and vulnerability.

Contents:

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Dedication:

I would like to dedicate my thesis exhibition and supporting paper to the memory of my late parents, Fredrick Guthrie Duncan, and Anna Jean Duncan. Their unconditional love and support have enabled me to pursue my goals and actualize my dreams.

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The Privilege of Being Solid

Introduction:

The recent body of work that I have produced for my MFA graduating exhibition entitled "the privilege of being solid" continues my exploration of sculptural forms, mark-making and installation in wax, as well as my conceptual interests in ideas related to impermanence, vulnerability, chance, and uncertainty. My materials and processes are central to my studio practice and are the means by which I came to understand and articulate my conceptual ideas. I hold these ideas as philosophically and spiritually relevant and will discuss their origin and impact on my artwork in this paper. However, it is important for me to note as the artist that, in relation to my art practice, my conceptual concerns arise from my working process and life experiences, rather than being superimposed onto the final objects from external sources. I am an artist who is driven by sensual engagement with the everyday materials I employ, and by the pleasure of physical, laborious art making processes, and these should be understood as the foundation upon which my conceptual ideas are built. This paper, and the descriptions and ideas that I discuss here, will serve to contextualize this work, but not, I hope, to explain or reduce it to a set of predetermined conceptual aims.

Cushion: The first works made during my MFA program that successfully reflected my interest in ideas related to vulnerability and impermanence were a series of hollow beeswax pillows that were constructed on site for gallery exhibitions in Nanaimo and Toronto. To make each one I utilized a slip cast technique. This entails pouring a small amount of beeswax into a slip mould and swirling the wax around inside until it completely covers the inside surface. I would then hang the mould in order to allow the wax to set before the "pillows" were removed. Many of these fragile pillows would break or crack when being removed, which further accentuates a sense of fragility and vulnerability. These small pillows are both straight-forward and contradictory, embodying a sense of tenderness and promise, as well as pathos and brittle fragility. Since making them I have continued to explore the pillow as a form to see what it might yield. I use the pillow form as a metaphor for ideas related to comfort and security along with the ultimate failure of these ideas.

At the end of the two exhibitions, the pillows, due to their fragility, were destroyed and shipped back to me in boxes.

the value of not knowing

When I started the MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan, I was grieving the death of my mother who had passed away the year before. Then during that first year,

my dad also passed away, and I began a process of personal re-evaluation that reflected a confrontation with my own mortality. This re-evaluation was combined with the realization that the things that I believed to be true meant much less in the face of that impermanence. The identity I had constructed that had roots firmly planted in the grounding that family provided began a slippage that continues today. Although 're-construction' is more or less always underway, the confrontation with mortality reminds me of what I so easily forget: that nothing here is solid and that attempts to attain certainty and permanence inevitably lead to disappointment.

The small wax pillows in *Cushion* embody in their material forms the inherent contradictions found in the relational bonds we create with those that we love. On the one hand our relationships hold great promise to sustain us with the love, support, and comfort we desire and require for healthy, happy living; on the other hand, they are ultimately as fragile and vulnerable as our bodies that will eventually sicken or age and die.

Mary Jane Jacob writes in Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art, "In the space of art, dwells the mind of I don't know. The empty mind is the creative mind."[1] She quotes Stephen Bachelor, who writes of the imperative for the creative process to leave behind its preconceptions, to allow the image to arise, and to stay open to what you don't know and haven't seen.[2] Although my current expression of uncertainty has been catalyzed by a confrontation with mortality, it has opened up a space within my art practice that is consistent with Buddhist notions of *bare attention.*

Buddhist psychiatrist Mark Epstein defines bare attention as a combination of focused concentration and open non-discriminating awareness: the radical acceptance of

[1] Jacob, p.162
[2] Ibid, p,163

all that appears in our field of awareness. [3] I agree with his suggestion that many artists find this kind of awareness an essential element in the creative process. There is something in the space that bare attention provides that is essential to the creative process as a whole: the suspension of judgment that allows the unconscious mind to inform the imagination, which in turn is able to interact unfettered with chance and the unexpected. [4]

Although it is not easy to speak of the value of uncertainty in an academic context where the thrust of our endeavors is to quantify, to contextualize and to know, it is this very idea, combined with investigations into vulnerability, fragility, and impermanence and the role these things play in the production and reception of art, that is the subject of this paper.

Comfort: These forty 11"x11" solid wax pillows are stacked one on top of another to create a 5'9" single tower, which is my own height. These dense wax pillows are cast solid with the waste wax I accumulated over ten years of working as a candle maker. After melting down an old slab or the detritus from another wax project, I would fill a pillow mould and just lay it on the floor to flatten out as it cooled. I considered this wax a waste material because it was contaminated with the pigments used in my manufacturing process that made the wax unusable in other end products. The pigment-saturated contamination reveals itself in the odd coloration of the pillows, which is reminiscent of modernist designer living rooms of the 50s

[3] Epstein, p31

[4] This kind of creative process informed early 20th century Dada and Surrealist art movements, influences that I will discuss later in this paper.

> and 60s. When considered separately they appear as commodity objects or even as tokens of currency exchange. Each pillow betrays its supposed lightness with its flat matte colour and its deceptive weight. The stack of forty pillows also reveals a minimalist aesthetic that I choose to undermine by collapsing the heroic stance of the tower. I do this by melting one side of the stack with a large torch. As the wax melts and the colours run together, I am returning the material to its original state.[5]

liminality

My parents were children of the depression who achieved a comfortable middle class existence for themselves and their family. They were both liberal and open-minded people who, although they did not always understand my decisions, always encouraged me to follow my own path. That support has enabled me to make radical turns within my life and take risks I might not have otherwise taken.[6]

With the loss of my parents, my worldview, along with my place within it, has been radically transformed. A large part of my identity was tied to my place within a family mythology. Part of that mythology proclaimed that things would never change: that we would always be a cohesive, tight-knit unit. In the last number of years my parents acted as a kind of interface between myself, my siblings and their families. They acted as an anchor that kept me connected. I was the youngest of their five children and the only child who chose to live "away". After their deaths that anchor was pulled up and I entered a liminal period where my position in relation to the rest of my family began to drift and my own mortality came into sharper focus.

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[5] This waste material began as a grey wax of medium colour value. Through processes of distillation, I have been able to separate the pigments in order to get a lighter grey wax, which in turn I am able to lightly tint with other pigments.

[6] See appendix A.

> *In a rite of passage something is extinguished, something becomes extinct.: if not you yourself, in your bodily being then something you are, a status or position in which you have been fixed, from which you have drawn your identity, to which you referred your experiences in order to give them meaning and coherence. And then… the status crumbles, the position disappears, the identity is no longer your own. You have entered, in Arnold van Genneps famous conception, a 'liminal period' from which you emerge transformed.* [7]

I could have covered my feelings of discomfort with a pragmatic emotional armoring that might have given me a stronger sense of control and ability to "manage". However, in the end that would have deadened my intuitive expression that, through my lifelong interest in certain spiritual practices and through my more recent practices as an artist, I have come to value as much as or more than rational and logical responses to events. Rather than stifling potential insight into the nature of self and identity, I chose instead to remain open, to embrace this liminality and to engage these experiences in my studio practice.

Untitled: (Coming to Rest) In another iteration of the pillow form, I have cast very large pillow-like objects that speak to something closer to the body: to impermanence and the degenerative nature of our corporeality. These forms are cast in a similar way to the smaller pillows in *Cushion* but here the moulds are larger and are left to harden, and to interact with pieces of furniture as well as with the architecture of the university. In these works, the unstable nature of the

[7] Greenblatt, p.28

material is evident. As the pillows interact with the architectural spaces and furnishings they exhibit various states of disintegration and abjection that echo our own mortality and impermanence. I intend them to be cathartic for a viewer who might identify with them as bodies in various states of degeneration.

the abject

Julia Kristeva, in speaking about the public's reaction to the contemporary social, political, aesthetic and spiritual crises many of us find ourselves in today, and the art works that may reflect these, states:

> *"[people] can react in two ways. There are those who repress this state of crisis, who refuse to acknowledge it… others may be looking for a form of catharsis… when they look at these objects, their ugliness, their strangeness, they see their own abjection, and at that moment what occurs is a veritable state of communion."* [8]

For many people the intense fragmentation that is occurring in our culture can result in the loss of their sense of community and place and by extension their sense of identity and self. Kristeva notes: "what is interesting is that this crisis of the person, which I call abjection and which is a state of dissolution, can be experienced as either suffering or as rapture."[9] She encourages artists to come as close as possible to these crises, to accompany them and produce individual works that reflect them. [10]

The Privilege of Being Solid (A Word about Denial): This piece is generated from found images having to do with situations of potential danger that generate anxiety and various strategies designed to respond to these. I gathered the images from first aid manuals collected in used book stores, in-flight safety procedure instructions acquired

[8] Kristeva, p.23, from an interview with Charles Renwarden in a cata
Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century
[9] ibid, p.22
[10] ibid, p.27

> on recent trips, and other more obscure internet-image searches. I have manufactured small black slabs of wax by melting a small amount of black pigment with some old wax in a frying pan. After allowing the wax to cool, I remove the form from the pan and etch the images into the black surface. I rub tempera paint into the etched lines increasing the stone-like appearance of the slabs. As small monuments to our collective angst, they become iconic in their representation of our inherent need to control our environment.

As an artist considering the current climate of anxiety and fear, I believe there are possible ways to respond to our collective uncertainty other than futile attempts to control our environment or the alternatives of deep cynicism, ironic humor and an accompanying despair. Although some post-modern artists use these strategies as genuine responses to the collapse of the modernist hegemonic paradigm, I am interested in art and artists who explore other alternatives.

We live in a post-modern era of fragmentation and uncertainty, although modernist attitudes concerned with universals, certainties and a manic desire to control largely guide many of our institutions, political and otherwise. I believe that this desire to control creates cultural anxiety due to the virtual unattainability of certainty and control. This denial of our inherent insecurity, vulnerability and ultimate mortality generates a violence that feeds back into this collective anxiety. The loop perpetuates itself in a cycle of fear, denial and arrogance that fuels a raft of industries devoted to security, feeding off of our communal angst.

material, metaphor and memory

Wax, which has been the primary material in all the projects I have described this far, has held my interest for over 15 years. My relationship with the material developed over

ten years working as a candle maker. As a candle maker I primarily was concerned with producing the products for sale in my business, although I spent many hours in my studio experimenting with other processes and object making.

The use of wax has a long history in the production of art. Homer, writing in 800 B.C.E., makes mention of the painted hulls of warships. These painted hulls inspired creative producers of the day to utilize the encaustic processes originally developed to caulk the hulls of these ships, and apply them to a representative art.[11] Some of our oldest and best-preserved paintings can be found in the encaustic funerary portraiture from Greco–Roman Egypt from between 100 B.C.E. and 200 C.E.

Portrait of a boy inscribed with his name, Eutyches, c. 100-150 C.E. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) encaustic on limewood; 38 x 19cm

Of the many artists of the contemporary era who utilized encaustic methods in their art, I am most indebted to German conceptual artist, Joseph Beuys (1921-1986). His relationship to his materials (not only beeswax, but also fat, honey and felt) was deeply metaphorical and shamanic.

Joseph Beuys: How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare, Photo from Performance on Nov. 26, 1965.

"… when I appear as a kind of shamanistic figure, or allude to it, I do it to stress my belief in other priorities, and the need to come up with a completely different plan for working with substances. For instance: in places like universities, where everyone speaks so rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear."[12]

For Beuys, the elemental materiality of his objects was of primary importance and that materiality acted as a metaphor of something that itself transcends matter. His desire to utilize his material and art to act

[11] Mattera, p.15
[12] Moffitt, p.108

as a catalyst for social transformation has resonance for me in my own practice. Although Beuys was clear on the metaphoric meaning of his materials, my own interest in wax is also connected to the inherent contradictions I find in the material.

Wax maintains the appearance of something solid and static despite its classification as a liquid. Further, wax is always in flux. This notion of instability is one of the reasons I continue working with the material – it continues to surprise me. I am interested in Plato's metaphor of the mind as a wax block onto which our memories are engraved. Although the ability of ancient wax tablets and encaustic paintings to weather the ravages of time may serve well as metaphor for memory when memory is thought of as infallible and permanent, it falls apart in the light of what we now know through advances in neuroscience: memory is degenerative. We now know that the brain reconstructs our memories by sampling the events in our lives and then filling in the spaces between the sampled bits.[13] I am interested in the contradictions here. If the black tablets in *anxiety suite* are cared for, they have the potential to last for many years, perhaps for centuries. But due to their inherent fragility and vulnerability, the large wax cast pillows in my exhibition will only last a few short weeks.

> *The Falling Man:* On a 2'x6' panel coated with a thin veneer of beeswax, and on a series of small, 2"x2" waxed wooden squares as well as on clear slabs of paraffin wax of varying sizes, I have etched an image of a falling man. I then "ink" the etched line with black tempera and wipe it off to reveal the picture. These images of falling, though tentative and uncertain, are taking me somewhere. They are metaphors for surrender

[13] Wade, Tavris, Saucier, Elias, p.346-347

- the Buddhist notion of falling into concert with the way things are – with the wheel of Dharma, or the Tao. These images invite multiple interpretations: although they may represent ecstatic release, they also present an image familiar from media photographs of people falling or leaping from the windows of the World Trade Center. The falling figure today, more than ever, can generate a range of emotional responses.

uncertainty and letting go

For me, this image of a falling and/or floating man has become a recent obsession. It is relentless and will not leave me. In his book On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art, art historian James Elkins talks about one of his students and that student's obsession with an image that showed up in all of his work. Elkins describes how the student's obsession and its manifestation is part of the surrealist tradition woven together with the concept of the sublime.[14] He goes on to describe the sublime as having to do with something beyond the world as we experience it.

The ecstatic aspect of this image of the falling man is evident in Yves Klein's 1960 photograph, "Man in Space". It is important to me in its sublime uncertainty. On the one hand, the image of a man falling through the

Harry Shunk / Yves Klein
Man in Space! The Painter Throws Himself Into the Void! 1960

[14] Elkins, p.99

air might induce a feeling of anxiety in the viewer; on the other hand, this man could be flying. It is a hopeless image that is potentially full of hope. With the image of the falling man, I am looking for a way to illustrate and/or demonstrate the ambiguity of his plight. Of course, the falling man is me. I am not sure where gravity is taking me, but I am very interested in the process of letting go and where that leads.

Gravitas: The video in this exhibition captures images of me falling. Working in the most literal way possible, I seek to illustrate the effect of gravity on my body. I maintain a neutral position before the camera, then I simply let go and allow gravity to pull my body to the floor. In some shots I crumple where I stand, and in others I fall forward, back, or to the side. In some sequences, I utilize editing software to invert the action, in the desire to generate a sense of levity that is in direct contrast to the title of the piece. In other sequences, through the use of extreme close ups and slow motion, a sense of pathos is generated. I am interested in inserting a moment of weighted emotional content into the extended absurdity of my captured, repeated movements.[15]

American video artist Bill Viola is an artist whose work stands out for me in a resonant way at this juncture in my life and art practice. His work embodies little or no irony,

[15] The piece is indebted to both Yves Klein (*Yves Klein in the Void Room*) as well as Bill Viola (*The Passions).*

does not refer to other contemporary art. Rather his art is devoted to what Viola refers to as the "great themes". He states:

> *"A lot of things involved in our inner lives are just not being addressed by art…love and hate and fear, the great themes of birth and death and consciousness… they are unsolvable and mysterious in the positive sense and therefore life-giving."*[16]

Viola engages in art that explores the spiritual and perceptual side of human experience. Through the influence of Buddhism fused with that of other religious traditions such as Sufism and Christian Mysticism, Viola's art seeks to achieve sublime and reasoned reflections on human nature.[17] He is interested in making work from the space where his art practice and spiritual practice intersect.

Viola works with artistic themes such as the representation of time and beauty, as well as imaging the energy of human emotions. After the death of his father in 1999, Viola states:

> *"I was interested in making work that had to do with intense emotional forces that rise up and wash over us like a storm surge… I was most interested in the inner turbulence emotion creates, and its shape and form through time."*[18]

Chemical Portraits: In this series of photos, I have combined images of my own face with those of my parents. I started by collapsing portraits of myself with others in my family in response to a feeling of disconnection that I was experiencing in relation to them. This was an attempt to concretize my place within my family community. I spent a lot of time on the first images that I

[16] Walsh, p. 57
[17] Jacob, p.272
[18] ibid, p.251

produced, trying to hide their photoshopped, composite structure. But while compiling some quick sketches, I found that as the construction became more obvious and not so disguised, a sense of the uncanny became more distinct and present. In the end, it was the portraits of myself merged with those of my parents that became most potent for me. With their aged faces superimposed over my own, the reality of my own mortality became more apparent along with a sense of how fragile and tentative the construction of my own identity really is. These portraits are a response to my own crisis of identity and loss.

the uncanny

In my artwork I am interested in shifting the frames of reference in a viewer, disrupting the certainty of what is being seen. Such a strategy can rupture rational perceptions, stir the imagination and tap into what lurks within the unconscious mind. I am interested in the evocation of the uncanny. In Surrealism and the Sacred, art historian, Celia Rabinovitch, states that "the sensation of the uncanny oscillates between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between appearance and actuality… imbuing ordinary phenomena with fearsome energy."[19]

The title of my series, *Chemical Portraits,* evokes this collapse through its reference to the medieval, Rosicrucian, alchemical text entitled "The Chemical Wedding". This is a treatise in which each figure undergoes multiple transformations involving dissolution and regeneration, culminating in the union of opposites.[20] These portraits allow me to engage in a transformation of elements, as occurs in alchemy, that is linked to our experience of the uncanny. Alchemy elicits the uncanny by blurring the boundaries of its composite elements, and by the collapsing and blending of opposing forces that can occur in the alchemist's practice.

[19] Rabinovitch, p.15
[20] ibid, p.19

The Chemical Portraits hold both a strange beauty and a sense of the abject. In The Powers of Horror, Julie Kristeva defines the abject thus: "Our reaction … to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other." [21] In these blended portraits, my own identity is merged with that of my deceased parents. This lack of distinction is literally present in these works, although I understand this more generally as a generative space within my practice as an artist. My "collapse" into the creative process is like falling from the known into a transitional unknown. As I enter this liminal space, images, thoughts and emotions percolate up from my unconscious self. As I engage with the materials in my studio, those emerging thoughts, emotions and imagery find their way into the collection of projects that are always underway.

These portraits, however, are more abject than most of my work and point to an unflattering portrayal of illness, aging and ultimately death. Although these are the very things at the heart of the "impermanence" I want to embrace, I acknowledge my own degree of discomfort with this abjection as well as a concern that I not offend my family with this work. I had shown my siblings and their families the earlier, slicker images that were more flattering and they unanimously gave me their support, and encouraged me to continue my project. My family is in the photographic business and their livelihoods revolve around a kind of photographic flattery that fuels the photo-retail industry. I have yet to show them the later photo composites, which are less flattering. The tension I feel continues to trouble me, but it is also generative since these portraits make me confront my own mortality, the ultimate impermanence. The deep

[21] Kristeva, from The Power of Horror

respect that I have for my parents combined with the disturbing sense of our shared abjection in this work, evoke in me feelings of deep love and deep terror.

Early 20th-century theologian Rudolph Otto speaks of the importance of ideas of horror and of tremor in his seminal text, The Idea of the Holy. Otto uses the word tremor to refer to *Mysterium Tremendum,* "a perfectly natural emotion of fear…but denoting quite a different emotional response, wholly distinct from that of being afraid."[22] He relates it to religious dread or awe: "daemonic dread … first begins to stir in the feeling of 'something uncanny, eerie or weird'. It is this feeling which… forms the starting point for the entire religious development in history."[23] Otto connects this excited state to our experience of the *numinous*[24]. In the face of great awe, beauty and/or terror, there is dissolution of the ego-self that he refers to as creature consciousness.[25] *Mysterium Tremendum* is a feeling experienced in direct response to the numen or the numinous.[26] In the combination of love and terror I experienced throughout the production of my *Chemical Portraits*, this sense of the numen was present.

Rudolph Otto was the first Christian theologian to emphasize the essentially non-verbal and non-rational experience at the heart of religion. Art historian, James Elkins relates this, as do I, to the non-verbal experience of art making. Elkins goes on to say that art is mystical, properly speaking, when it involves an intimate, personal, or

[22] Otto, p.14
[23] ibid, p.14
[24] Otto defines this as having a strong religious or spiritual quality that suggests a divine presence.
[25] Ibid, p10
[26] ibid, p.11 In thinking about the spiritual and how related ideas connect to art, art historian James Elkins suggests that Otto's definition of the numinous may be the closest to a one-word definition of spirituality that informs some current contemporary art practices.

private connection with something transcendental.[27] I would add here that the experience of the mystical is by definition something outside rational discourse. These states inform my studio practice that excavates the unconscious, and whose source is essentially non-verbal and unknowable.

surreal connections

Rudolph Otto's The Idea of the Holy (1923) and Andrea Breton's Surrealist Manifesto (1924) were both published within the span of a year. Around the same time, Freud's theories of the unconscious with its connection to the non-rational and the uncanny were also being translated into French for the first time making these ideas available to Breton and his peers. Inspired in large part by Freud's theories, the surrealist project, as set out by Breton, was intent on generating literature and art that thwarted logic and rationality by assigning value to the unconscious mind and the life of dreams. These ideas had previously been ignored by the avant-guard.

Celia Rabinovitch characterizes the Surreal as emotionally disturbing, metaphorical, ambiguous and linked to the sacred: "Behind [surrealism's] elusive potency of mood and charged associations lie the fundamental ambivalence and non-rational power of the sacred."[28] She goes on to state: "as a reaction to the domination of rationalism, surrealism consciously identified with the rejected lineage of occultism…alchemy and the esoteric."[29] Thus, the creative output of surrealist artists in the 1920s and 1930s sprang from an emotional oscillation that resonated with the awe-

[27] Elkins, p.106 Elkins equates transcendence with the sublime and both with experiences beyond the world as we experience it. – as something transmundane. (p95)
[28] Rabinovitch, p.4
[29] ibid, p.5

filled quality of archaic sacred power.[30] The surreal floats between the everyday and the sacred, within the strange associations and connections made by making the mundane or the profane extraordinary.

Both Dada and Surrealist artists explored doubt as an aspect of creativity, in order to critique the modernist crusade for certainty and domination. Dada was based on the principles of deliberate irrationality, anarchy, and cynicism and the rejection of laws of beauty and social organization. This position was a reaction to the hypocrisy inherent in the promise of modernism viewed through the carnage left in the wake of WW1. Taiwanese art critic, Tosi Lee, notes in his essay in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art,* that the German Dadaists were particularly attracted to the proto-Zen, Taoist philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. He cites Tristan Tzara, the spokesman for Zurich Dada, as saying that Dada was a return to a quasi-Buddhist religion of indifference. He also cites Richard Huelsenbeck, editor of *Dada Almanach,* an American Dada publication: "Dada is the American side of Buddhism…it raves because it knows how to be silent, it acts because it is in a state of rest."[31]

Surrealism, on the other hand, rejected the nihilism that had developed within the Dada movement, and embraced a more positive position. The Surrealists used symbolism in mischievous and unexpected ways to activate the imagination in order to understand and engage human unconscious impulses. The Surrealists sought to collapse distinctions held dear by Western modernist traditions – the conscious and unconscious, dream and action and the real and the imaginary – thus offering the possibility of a more imaginative, responsive civilization.

[30] ibid, p.4
[31] Lee, p.126

Dada may be considered to share commonalities with our contemporary deconstructionist, post-modern malaise, whereas Surrealism is more hopeful and utopian in tone. A desired goal for the Surrealists was to shift the frames of reference in order to instill a sense of the marvelous, a sense of the uncanny and to ultimately produce an epiphany in a viewer willing to journey into uncertainty. Their goal of epiphany has been called "a state of grace" (Breton), "a sudden spiritual manifestation" (James Joyce), and "exquisite pauses in time" (Paton).[32] Rabinovitch states: "surrealism can be understood as a secular, modern movement… that used the manifesto to transform society – but in this case used hopeful 19th century utopianism to seek a state of grace at the threshold of the sacred."[33] What interests me most here is the Surrealist emphasis on the non-rational and the way in which it is used in poetry and art as a way to open up the world of possibility and imagination that might potentially contribute to a better world.

Ghost: I was in Ontario last year caring for my father as he was dying, when I was invited, on short notice, to mount an exhibition at Deleon White Gallery in Toronto. It was an emotionally difficult time, but my family encouraged me to accept the gallery's offer, not knowing how many days my dad would live. He died only two days later and I mounted the show the following week, right after his memorial service. *Ghost* was one of

[32] Rabinovitch, p.29
[33] Rabinovitch,p.9

the pieces I made for this exhibition. On a black wooden panel, I carefully poured out over 40lbs of pure white paraffin. With ritual attention, I emptied cup after cup of the melted wax in a circle two and half feet in diameter. After allowing the wax to cool I repeated the action, reversing the direction from time to time. When *Ghost* was complete it was hung vertically on the wall. It appeared to shimmer and float just off the surface of the wall and embodied for me a distinct sense of the numinous that approached the sublime.

gravity and chance

Ghost was a variation on a theme of wax pour pieces I've made over the past few years. Installed temporarily in gallery spaces or on support structures (panels), these pieces are made by choosing the color, size and configuration of the pour, and then carefully pouring the wax out in the predetermined pattern.[34] As the wax builds up on the piece, there is a topography that emerges on the surface. Gravity and the melting temperature of the wax interact to generate a random distribution of wax tributaries falling within the parameters of the chosen pattern. This series of wax pours deal with a sense of gravity and letting go. As the artist I engage in making aesthetic decisions such as color, size and placement of the

[34] Some works are rings, some are mounds, some are lines and some are "falls".

individual pieces, but the process of making these works is essentially a "chance operation."[35] I seek to collaborate with the natural forces of gravity and temperature. Although the parameters of chance may be small and somewhat predictable, in this series the important thing for me is to get out of the way.

Elkins speaks about "an emblematic moment in which the sublime is said to break down. The post-modern, or the 'now sublime' ends in uncertainty rather than pleasure and it turns our thoughts back on themselves instead of freeing them – as Kant said – to measure themselves against the infinite."[36] I would suggest that ending in uncertainty and turning our thoughts back on themselves can elicit a kind of post-modern pleasure, a kind of knowingness that things may in fact be unknowable (similar to a Zen koan). This is part of the essence of what I think my art and my art-making process is about: to find the pleasure in ambiguity and to try not to resolve things in certainty. Pleasure plays an integral part in the making and reception of art for me. My intention is to convey that pleasure to others.

For me, the pleasure derived from an experience of the "now sublime" has the potential to generate an ecstatic moment. Art critic and historian, Suzi Gablik, talks about the need for the ecstatic experience in our contemporary culture in her book, The Re-Enchantment of Art: "Our loss of ecstatic experience in contemporary western society has affected every aspect of our lives and created a sense of closure, in which there seems to be no alternative, no hope, and no exit from the addictive system we have created. In our man-made environments, we have comfort and luxury but there is little ecstasy."[37] Gablik defines this ecstatic experience as an archetypal need of our being that is not being met. Boredom,

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[35] In using this phrase I am claiming affinity with American composer and artist, John Cage. He employed various devices, such as throwing the I-Ching, an ancient Chinese oracle device, or enlisting other musicians in his compositions to make their own choices within the parameters he set out, in order to introduce the element of chance into his compositions. He called these *chance operations*.

[36] Elkins, 99

[37] Gablik, p.84

cynicism and chronic materialism are the symptoms of this contemporary malaise.[38] Art is uniquely placed to critique this lack and to potentially offer a context for an experience of ecstasy, or at the very least, enchantment.

re-enchantment

In today's globalized art market, art that embodies hopefulness or enchantment is often not considered to be relevant. Gablik advocates an art-world paradigm shift from an art that is insular and elitist to an art that is emotionally and/or spiritually engaged, as well as socially relevant. She states that there is now in our culture an affliction of nihilism that is like a cancer of the spirit from which enchantment might liberate us.[39] This echoes Breton's Surrealist rejection of Dada's nihilism and the subsequent call for activation of the imagination to facilitate an envisioning of a healthier society. Many art critics and historians have not greeted Gablik's approach favorably, however. They suspect her approach will lead to a dumbing down of art-related discourses. They fear an art that is "in search of a better world" runs counter to the modernist mantra of *art for art's sake* and may sacrifice quality for commentary. These objections by some of our intellectual and cultural elite strike me as a hoarding of "cultural capital" [40] and an unwillingness to expand the boundaries of art, its production and its attendant discourses to include more inclusive and holistic practices.

Those who object to the paradigm shift proposed by Gablick also fail to recognize that Gablik herself does not advocate an unrealistic idealism. In fact, Gablick contends that changing this paradigm will most likely occur through people who are as

[38] Ibid, p. 85
[39] Gablik, p11
[40] French philosopher and sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, in his book Distinction, speaks about cultural capital as a means by which patrons and appreciators of works of art can acquire power from their rarified understanding and/or exclusive possession of those works , p.227

far removed from utopianism as they are from cynicism.[41] The application of this paradigm shift will require a "stepping away from the modern traditions of mechanism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism and secularism—the whole objectifying consciousness of the Enlightenment." [42] She advocates the opening up of the mythic vision that is ever present in our unconscious but whose very existence has been denied by contemporary culture[43]. Consistent with this perspective are observations from fields quite disparate from art, including psychoneuroimmunology. Researchers in this field are now recognizing that being hopeful, positive and open promotes health and improves our ability to heal ourselves when we are sick.[44] Being collectively hopeful then, it could be surmised, promotes social health while, conversely, being hopeless will promote social dis-ease.

tremulous beauty

The desire to evoke an experience of the marvelous that elicits an emotional response is something that informs my practice. New York art critic, Peter Schjeldahl, states in an essay entitled "Notes on Beauty*":*

> *"Mind and body become indivisible in beauty. Beauty teaches me that my brain is a physical organ and that 'intelligence' is not limited to thought, but entails feeling and sensation, the whole organism in concert. Centrally involved is a subtle excitation in or about the heart – the muscular organ, not the metaphor."* [45]

[41] Gablik, p23
[42] Gablik, p.11
[43] ibid, p.56
[44] ibid, p.24
[45] Schjeldahl, p88

Schjeldahl goes on to suggest that even the odd, the ugly and I would add the sad and/or the surprising can be beautiful. He distinguishes between the historically-loaded abstract piety of "Beauty", and beauty as a phenomenon located in the mind and body.[46]

In her essay, "In the Space of Art", Mary Jane Jacob states that art and art's processes are powerful manifestations of interconnectedness. She goes on to say that Buddhist ideas of interconnectedness have resonance with the post-colonial notion of *both/and*. This is particularly the case in the way that appreciation of the both/and concept works to dismantle dichotomies of us/them, either/or etc.[47] "Interconnectedness speaks to multiculturalism and diversity, and to a new universalism—a renewed humanism—allowing for consideration of *both* the culturally specific, *and* a universal nature among all cultures."[48] I would suggest that Schjeldahl's idea of a phenomenological beauty is the emotional/bodily corollary to the post-modern or "now sublime". The mental and physiological processes that envelop us as we encounter the "now sublime" can be triggered by experiences of the uncanny by suspending judgment and entertaining uncertainty. Furthermore, I posit that the blurring or collapsing of the subject and object in these situations, whether that results in a sublime or an abject beauty, has correlations with Buddhist notions of bare attention, mindfulness and interconnectedness.

To return to the beginning of this essay, my work is generated in part out of the Buddhist practice of bare attention as well as an interest in the uncanny and its relationship to the unconscious and to the sacred. My intention is to embed within my works signs and signifiers that serve to shift the frames of reference in a viewer and to elicit a feeling-response from them. When my own frame of reference is shifted either by making my own

[46] ibid, p.89
[47] The both/and concept does this by accepting the inevitability of parallel personal, cultural and historical narratives
[48] Jacob, p.168

work or through an experience of the work of other artists, my attention moves away from the narrowing tendency of the rational mind toward an expansion of possibility. I am hopeful that a sea change is underway in the worlds of art, and that the acknowledgment of our interconnectedness is part of that change. The change is reflected in works of art that resist cynicism and hopelessness and that engage the imagination. For my part, I would like my own art to participate in this project.

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Appendix A

Spiritual Auto-biography

I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s in a middle-class suburban household that was nominally religious (United Church). As a child, I soon developed the prayers that I was taught into my own elaborate narrative system. These began with the basics of *now I lay me down to sleep*, but included elaborate lists of requests and subsequent thanks for requests previously granted. The narrative line of these prayers had a graphic, visual presence that ebbed and flowed in my mind's eye depending on my desires and the lists of thanks required to remain in good standing with God, the wish fulfiller. There was a mechanistic, materialistic tone to my religiosity as a child. Although now this seems rather shallow and embarrassing to me, I do recall that the ritual aspect to these prayers had a lasting impact. My deeper spiritual nourishment and ideas came from my grandmother. She instructed me with the use of parables that, to the best of my knowledge, she made up. From these morality tales I developed my own moral compass that I still carry with me.

In my childhood experiences, there were few or no feelings that I might now call spiritual. However, when I became a teenager things started to open up. Like many of my generation, I was exposed to the countercultural interest in mind-altering drugs and meditation. I was 14 the first time I tried LSD. It was the end of the private religion that I had practiced up until that point. That particular night in 1974, after coming home from the party where I had taken the acid, I went to bed and said my ritual prayers. When the accompanying visual representation presented itself in my mind's eye (a long, narrow, multi-tiered three-dimensional structure), I noticed that it was being bored through by a colony of ants: carpenter ants drilling holes in my prayers and turning them to dust.

In a flash, a veil was ripped away and after a second or two of terror, an exquisite rush of excited uncertainty engulfed my adolescent consciousness. After these rushes of emotion had subsided, I had the distinct feeling that time had been suspended. I laughed as I realized that I had passed through an initiation from boyhood into something wider and more mysterious. I realized in that moment that the God I had been praying to was not necessary anymore and that, if in fact I wanted one, I must actively pursue a relationship with the Divine. This was my first epiphany.

The following year I attended Transcendental Meditation classes along with my parents and my brother. We were all given mantras and taught how to meditate. My early experiences of meditation included an experience of a vast emptiness that was infused with a silent, intense awareness. Coupled with a new awareness of self that my experiences with LSD had awakened in me, these early experiences with meditation ignited a wider and more intense thirst for spiritual experiences. These experiences of an internal/eternal mystery fueled a seeking in me that continues today.

In my early twenties, I encountered the teachings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho), and was initiated into his "mystery school". My search for and commitment to spiritual liberation deepened. Although not a Buddhist, Rajneesh spoke about and wrote many books on Zen as well as numerous other faith traditions: Sufism, Christianity, and Hinduism as well as on teachers such as G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ospensky and J.Krishnamurti all of whom brought eastern philosophies to the west. Although many of my experiences with Rajneesh remain enigmatic and contradictory, my time with him affirmed and challenged my own subjectivity. In Nirvana: the Last Nightmare, Rajneesh states: "Nirvana, Tao, or truth is an existential experience. One has to dissolve into it to know it. Even to call it an experience is not exactly right, because it is more like experiencing than like an experience." [49]

Like many of my generation, the radical nature of my seeking mellowed as I grew older and I was drawn to a simpler quieter approach to insight. Thus, I have more recently been drawn to Buddhist thought and practice, as taught in the west, and these have, in turn, informed my creative process as an artist.

[49] Rajneesh, p171